

THE GCC AS A REGIONAL SECURITY ORGANIZATION

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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which brings together the countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates was established in 1981 in response to the regional turmoil of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. At the outset, security surpassed all other reasons for the coming together of these countries as the fall of the Shah of Iran, the emergence of a revolutionary regime in Tehran intent on “exporting its revolution” to the neighborhood, and the subsequent outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980 threatened the very survival of the Arab Gulf monarchies. By coming together, the GCC was able to present something of a common front and the organization emerged from what Abdulla refers to as an “objective necessity.”¹

The timing of the GCC’s establishment was also somewhat opportunistic as it allowed the Arab Gulf states to come together in the framework of a multilateral organization that could pursue common ambitions while at the same time keeping the two main antagonists of a regional security order – Iran and Iraq – out of such arrangement. There certainly existed a predominant feeling among the Arab Gulf leaderships that the longer the six states waited to move ahead with the establishment of a regional organization, the more likely it was that the pressure and influence from Iran and Iraq would increase to the point where agreement might not be possible. Inaction was thus not an option. At the same time and given the fact that



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1 | Abdul Khaleq Abdulla, *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Nature, Origin and Process*, in: Michael Hudson, ed., *Middle East Dilemma: The Politics and Economics of Arab Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 150-170, especially 162.

the GCC's creation was seen more as an ad hoc reaction rather than a calculated rational initiative, there existed a lot of skepticism about whether the GCC would survive as an organization and that it was more or less "born to die."

Since that initial period and despite many of its shortcomings, the GCC has nevertheless survived. Not only has it withstood the calamities which have engulfed the region and which continue to threaten its member states from a variety of security angles, but it has achieved noticeable progress in aspects of regional integration, even moving forward on such projects as a common market and a common currency, and begun to play an increasing role in political and security-related matters at the sub-regional level of the Gulf as well. The result is that the GCC has "passed the test of 'to be or not to be'" and has "amply proven its survivability."² Moreover, individually the GCC member states have consolidated themselves politically and they are at present time more stable than ever.

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But what exactly is the GCC? Can it be considered a full-fledged security community that has over the time of its existence played a positive role in resolving security dilemmas in the Gulf? What do the terms of unity, integration, cooperation and coordination which are used so interchangeably actually mean within the context of this regional organization? And if the GCC has begun to shape the regional security environment, in what ways does this manifest itself? These are central questions to be addressed especially considering the critical role that the Gulf region plays in shaping many of the key current security questions dominating international headlines.

IS THE GCC A SECURITY ORGANIZATION?

When the GCC was established in May of 1981, it held up the lofty goals of “co-ordination, integration, and co-operation among the member-states in all fields.”³ Such consideration was not born out of a vacuum. A call by the Kuwaiti Crown Prince Shaikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah in May 1976 had suggested the “establishment of a Gulf Union with the object of realizing cooperation in all economic, political, educational and informational fields.”⁴ In the same year, there was also a first attempt at writing a defense agreement, but given that a common formula could not be agreed upon, the concept was shelved for the time being. In addition, the period of the 1970s had witnessed the creation of the Gulf Organization for Industrial Consultancy, a Gulf Ports Union, the Gulf News Agency, the Gulf Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and a regional airline called Gulf Air. Given these developments, al-Musfir called the founding of the GCC the “embodiment of long-standing efforts.”⁵

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3 | Specifically, the charter referred to:

- Achieving cooperation among the member states in all fields as a prelude to unity
- Strengthening the links of cooperation among the peoples of the member states in different fields
- Establishing similar systems among the member states in the fields of economics and finance, commerce, customs and communications; education and culture; social welfare and health; information and tourism; and legislation and administration
- Stimulating scientific and technological progress in the fields of industry, mineralogy, agriculture and marine and animal resources as well as to encourage cooperation of the private sector for the common good of the people of the member states.

For the original charter, refer to the website of the GCC under <http://www.gcc-sg.org/> (accessed September 17, 2010).

4 | Cf. J.E. Peterson, “The GCC and Regional Security,” in: John A. Sandwick, ed., *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Moderation and Stability in an Interdependent World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), 171-173.

5 | Muhammad Saleh al-Musfir, Political Security Issues at the Concluding Statements of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Sessions 1981-2001: An Analytical Study of the Content, *Digest of Middle East Studies* (Fall 2004), 32.

Curiously, given that the GCC's establishment was the direct result of a deteriorating regional security environment that saw in the span of two years the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979 and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980, security and defense cooperation was not alluded to in the original charter. None of the initial committees set up as part of the GCC dealt exclusively with security as such. The final communiqué issued after the first summit meeting in

May 1981 merely affirmed the will and the intention of the signatories to defend their security and independence and to keep the region free of international conflicts. The basic objectives of the GCC as defined in Article 4 also did not spell out a clear mandate for greater security cooperation nor did it define the existing security environment as being a predominant concern of the time, although this was certainly the case.

This has been a persistent theme since 1981 as the concerns over security have not been matched by sufficient progress on bringing about coordinated defense and security policies. To be sure, the GCC states have attempted to put forward security and military arrangements to promote the concept of regional self-defense. The first was the stated commitment to form a collective military force. The decision to establish the Peninsula Shield Forces in December 1986 was initially announced as a new era in military and security cooperation and one that would lay the foundation for

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a collective self-defense capability, in turn erasing the dependency on outside defense support. But in 1990, the Peninsula Shield force was confronted with its first real challenge when Iraqi forces attacked and occupied the GCC member state of Kuwait and the ineffectiveness of the force became immediately apparent. It was only because of the international coalition assembled under the United States that Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait was reversed. In December 1990, the GCC summit issued the "Doha Declaration" in which the leaders recognized the ineffectiveness of the GCC defense and security arrangements and their failure either to deter the Iraqi aggression or to protect Kuwait against the invasion. The statement

pointed to “the inadequacy of the GCC security arrangements” and called for the establishment of new “security and defense arrangement capable of ensuring the national security of every GCC state and protecting the regional security for all six states.”⁶

The inability of the GCC states to collectively deter the Iraqi aggression and the need to rely on Western forces for their own defense raised serious questions that continue to the present day. What became clear was that each member state had different conception of how a joint military force should be structured and what purposes it should serve. Saudi Arabia, which provided the bulk of the forces including maintaining the headquarters, had hoped that Peninsula Shield would emerge as a competent force able to contribute to regional conflict management and resolution. The Sultanate of Oman held a similar perspective. The other GCC states, however, did not share this assessment. For them, the Kuwait experience had proved the effectiveness of external, primarily US, security guarantees and demonstrated the limited value of the national or regional defense capability to deal with the sources of threats in the region.

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The different perceptions about the utility of Peninsula Shield led to a growing hesitancy on behalf of the smaller GCC states about possibly revamping the force and even expanding it. This included concerns that a large standing force would simply be led and dominated by Saudi Arabia and could possibly be used at some stage to even intimidate them and influence their policies. Thus, while it was clear that the initial 5,000 strong force was simply insufficient, it was not possible to agree to enlarge the force to 25,000 or even 100,000 personnel as Oman had proposed in order to raise its effectiveness.

Following years of indecision and non-movement on the issue, Saudi Arabia circulated a proposal during the GCC summit meeting in Riyadh in December 2006 calling for the adoption of the principle of “centralized command and

6 | GCC documents, 6th Year , No. 21 , Prepared by the GCC General Secretariat. Cf. also: <http://www.gcc-sg.org/index.php?action=Sec-Show&ID=113> (accessed September 17, 2010).

de-centralized forces” and disbanding the Peninsula Shield force as a collective single military unit. What the kingdom proposed was that each GCC state should designate certain military units to be part of the new proposed military structure with those units stationed within each state’s national territory and linked to a unified central command. While member states acknowledged the proposal and agreed to study it further, again there was no decision made. What instead emerged is the agreement at the 2009 GCC summit to create a joint force for quick intervention to address security threats.⁷ More recently, there has also been the proposal by the naval chiefs of the GCC to look into the formation of a joint naval force to combat piracy and guarantee the safety of the seas.⁸ In the end, these are minimal concession to a concept that has failed to live to its expectations.

In addition to attempts at establishing formal security and military arrangements, there has also been a political-legal commitment for common defense. At their summit in December 2000, the member states concluded the GCC Joint Defense Agreement in order to provide a framework for collective defense based on the principle that any aggression against a member state would be considered as aggression against all the GCC states. The agreement placed all the six states under obligation to provide military assistance to help each other. It further established a Joint Defense Council and a Military Committee to supervise cooperation. The agreement also sought to promote collaboration in a number of military activities including joint military exercises and coordination in the field of military industries.

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Similar to the example of the Peninsula Shield, the joint defense agreement has scarcely progressed beyond limited cooperation and consultation. Instead, each state continues to maintain full control over its security and defense policy and acts almost exclusively according to its national interests and national strategy. The hope that the

7 | “GCC states agree on joint military force,” in: *Oman Tribune*, December 16, 2009.

8 | “GCC decides to form joint naval force,” in: *Arab News*, October 27, 2009.

agreement could one day lead to a unified defense policy with a unified central command therefore remains a distant objective.⁹

The conclusion to be drawn from the above is that the GCC has been unable to establish itself as a full-fledged regional security organization. This inability can be traced back to numerous factors. For one, the GCC has constraints built into the organization's development, some of which have been there by design. The main constraints are the lack of a supranational authority in effect providing the organization with no sovereignty or political independence, and the lack of any kind of authorization that can demand the compliance of member states on any matter.¹⁰ Because the GCC see themselves as young nation-states that only recently, historically speaking, obtained their independence, there has always existed a high degree of resistance to giving up on its sovereignty. As Louise Fawcett has succinctly noted: "Sovereignty was a prize to be nurtured, not one to be sacrificed on the altar of a pan-Arab movement, or one that extolled the virtues of integration."¹¹ In that context, it has always been easier to come to an agreement to what Peterson and Smith refer to as "low politics" on issues such as economics and welfare promotion rather than "high politics" where questions of national sovereignty are involved.¹²

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- 9 | For the GCC Joint Defense Agreement, see the GCC official website: <http://www.gcc-sg.org/index.php?action=Sec-Show&ID=49> (accessed September 17, 2010). Cf. also, Abdullah al-Shayehji, GCC leaders must look to strengthen security, harness GCC's soft power, in: *Gulf News* (UAE), December 14, 2009.
- 10 | Charles Tripp has poignantly asked how regimes that do not delegate sovereignty to their own peoples can delegate it instead to a regional body. See Charles Tripp, *Regional Organizations in the Arab Middle East*, in: Andrew Hurrell and Louise Fawcett, eds., *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organizations and International Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 11 | Louise Fawcett, *Alliances, Cooperation and Regionalism in the Middle East*, in: Louise Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, Second Edition), 196.
- 12 | John Peterson and Michael E. Smith, 'The EU as a Global Actor' in: Elizabeth Bomberg and Alexander Stubb, eds., *The European Union: How Does it Work?* (Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 197.

Yet, U.S. policies in the region remain highly problematic as they do not necessarily corresponded to the stated interests of the GCC states.

A second major factor is the external intervention in the region to the point that the Gulf represents a highly penetrated system. Here, the GCC states find themselves in a difficult quandary. Given the unsettled and unstable regional environment, the reliance on a strong and effective military power such as the United States continues to be seen as an essential element for the GCC states to safeguard their own security and national existence. From a pure security point of view, the GCC states are simply not to be in a position to defend the Gulf region or its own territories from external attack. Rather, as McNaugher has pointed out, the GCC can police the Gulf, try to settle disputes amicably, deter some damage and buy time until sufficient reinforcements arrive.¹³ Yet, U.S. policies in the region as well as the broader Middle East remain highly problematic as they do not necessarily corresponded to the stated interests of the GCC states and have at times even stood in contradiction to those interests. In fact, the involvement of the U.S. from the 1980s as a distinct military force providing protection to one assuming the role of ensuring regional security and acting as a regional hegemon with its decision to invade Iraq in 2003 has not contributed to resolving underlying Gulf's security dilemmas. Neither has the U.S. approach to the region found widespread acceptance at both the popular and the governmental level as evidenced by the current objection to a possible military confrontation with Iran.

Other outstanding issues that have prevented closer security cooperation include outstanding border issues and internal rivalries that continue to impact on the internal working of the GCC and cast a shadow on the organization's future outlook.¹⁴ Overall, there still exists a degree of suspicion and lack of trust that characterizes the relationship among the GCC states. Such suspicion has even spilled over into areas of economic cooperation where, for example, the project of a common currency has been hampered by the dispute between the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia over the location of the

13 | Thomas L. McNaugher, *Arms and Allies on the Arabian Peninsula*, *Orbis* 28, Nº 3 (Fall 1984): 517.

14 | The dispute between Qatar and Bahrain over fishing rights has been one of the latest examples of continuing differences and outstanding issues.

anticipated central bank. The result is the weakness of the GCC as an institution where the dichotomy of the individual vs. the collective level is ever present. In terms of security issues, these states also remain highly sensitive on issues of sovereignty and given the notion that a regional military force could be used to interfere in their own domestic affairs, they prefer to maintain the full control over their armed forces. This includes individual GCC member states preferring to have security arrangements or defense pacts with external states instead of developing more internal cooperative security networks and engaging in the larger process of confidence-building. All of this, in turn, leaves little room for compromise.

THE GCC AS A HETEROGENEOUS SECURITY COMMUNITY

Given all of what has been described above, inter-state cooperation thus remains fragile and institution-building limited with the result that the move towards greater regionalism is underdeveloped. But here a qualitative differentiation needs to be introduced. As the individual GCC states have consolidated themselves, the prospects and actual results of regional cooperation have significantly improved. While at the outset, the types of projects and policies agreed to at the outset may have represented the lowest common denominator principle in terms of the kind of association possible, the period since 1981 has moved beyond this minimalist conception to a broader and more inclusive concept of the GCC. Thus, within the GCC, progress towards the resolution of border

issues has been achieved with, for example, the UAE and Oman 2003 boundary agreement signed and ratified, with the Bahrain-Qatar (Hawar islands dispute) settled by the International Court of Justice in March 2001 and with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia finalizing their maritime borders demarcation agreement in 2000. To counter the threat posed by terrorism on their domestic security, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait coordinated their intelligence activities in the aftermath of the January 2005 incidents inside Kuwait while at the GCC level as a whole a Counter-Terrorism Agreement was signed in May 2005 that provided for unprecedented coordination in intelligence sharing and cross-border cooperation.

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The political cohesion of the GCC has also grown over time and there exists today a general consensus on the various challenges being faced by the Gulf States. One example has been the recent crisis in Yemen, where GCC leaders made it clear that “we declare full support for whatever actions Saudi Arabia takes to defend its territory.”¹⁵ Similar common views can be found on issues such as terrorism, on Iran and the need to curtail that country’s nuclear ambitions, as well as the means to provide for the stability of Iraq. This common perception is due to the frequent exchanges among the leaderships, their familiarity with one another and the realization that the coming together under the heading of the GCC has led to tangible benefits.

Most of those accomplishments have taken place on the economic front including the Joint Economic Agreement of 1981, the introduction of a Customs Union in 2002, the proposal for a common market in 2008, the introduction of a region-wide electricity grid, common transport and infrastructure projects, and even cooperation in the field of peaceful nuclear research. The confidence in the economic field has led to an increased readiness also to cooperate in other areas. Policy harmonization is today a guiding principle.

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To underline that the GCC has also taken on a regional security role is demonstrated by its increased readiness to put forward concepts and ideas about how to overcome the inherent security dilemmas that continue to confront the region. In a speech delivered by Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal during the 2004 Gulf Dialogue in Bahrain, he stated that there is an urgent need “for a collective effort aimed at developing a new and more solid framework for Gulf security” and he called on that framework to be based on subnational, regional and international components. By subnational, he referred to “actual and meaningful political, economic, social and educational reforms and not just cosmetic changes.” The regional component consists of “a unified GCC, a prosperous Yemen, a stable Iraq, and a friendly Iran.” And finally, acknowledging that international help will always be needed to underpin Gulf security, the Saudi foreign minister called on

15 | GCC opposes attack on Iran, in: *Arab News*, December 16, 2009.

guarantees provided by the international community but not “unilaterally ... by the only superpower in the world.”¹⁶ That these were not just words has been illustrated by the fact that Saudi Arabia has taken the initiative on trying to resolve many of the present security challenges including mediating between Iraqi sectarian factions and putting forward the King Abdullah Peace Plan as a framework for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Another GCC member, Qatar has taken a leading role in serving as a mediator between Lebanese factions or between the Yemeni government and the al-Houthi rebellion in that country. The UAE has contributed to coalition efforts in Afghanistan and contributed to anti-piracy efforts. All of this has led the GCC to become recognized as a more effective regional organization. On the economic front, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has acknowledged that the role of the GCC in terms of global influence is important.¹⁷

The GCC can therefore be defined as promoting regionalism if one accepts the term as a process where states share common goals and coordinate strategy and policy in a given region. The concept of regionalization implying a process encompassing an increase in region-based interaction and activity is probably an even more accurate description.¹⁸ The GCC does form a cohesive group in the sense that it maintains close ties to the West, it shares a degree of mistrust vis-à-vis its neighbors Iran and Iraq, and it contains similar political, economic and social systems. All of this has provided the necessary momentum whereby the GCC has been able to increasingly speak with one voice and where

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16 | “Towards a New Framework for Regional Security,” Statement by HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saudi Arabia at the Gulf Dialogue, Manama, December 5, 2004 available under http://www.mofa.gov.sa/media/35123_E05-12-04.pdf (accessed October 19, 2010)

17 | *The National* (Abu Dhabi), October 18, 2009.

18 | The definition put forward here and to which this author subscribes to is taken from Louise Fawcett, *Alliances, Cooperation and Regionalism in the Middle East*, in: Louise Fawcett, op.cit., 194. On the concept of regionalism and regionalization, one should refer to the excellent volume by Cilja Harders and Matteo Legrenzi, *Beyond Regionalism?: Regional Cooperation, Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2008).

the conviction has gained ground among all member states that the GCC is a useful tool to maximize security. Moreover, as Abdullah has stated: "The GCC continues to contradict the implications of the realist perspective in international relations theory that attempts at voluntary cooperation and integration among sovereign states in the anarchical environment of world politics are generally doomed to failure. The GCC's persistence instead confirms the more liberal assertion that cooperation and integration are not only attainable but are part and parcel of contemporary international relations, maybe more so now than ever."¹⁹

If one therefore wants to evaluate the role of the GCC in terms of contributing to regional security, a broader application of the security term is required. One specific aspect would be to distinguish between what Ehteshami called "the short-term requirements and the long-term vision" of Gulf security.²⁰ On the one hand, there is a need to enact steps leading to a lessening of tensions, i.e. more of a process of crisis management to prevent conflict from

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breaking out. In the long-term, however, a more broad-based approach has to be contemplated whereby the region can truly begin to work as a security community. This includes recognizing that security in the Gulf is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but instead is composed of a complex matrix of domestic, regional, and international factors that each play a distinctive role in formulating the perceptions and as a result, the policy choices of regional decision-makers.

What one finds in terms of the GCC is a regional actor coming to a consensus decision through the mechanism that exist at its disposal but unable to act decisively to prevent a crisis or conflict scenario from emerging. There exists agreement among the GCC states that Iran should not be allowed to have a military nuclear weapons program just as there is agreement that Iraq needs to have a stable political process without the interference from neighboring

19 | Abdullah, op.cit., 153.

20 | Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Iran, the GCC and Europe: Alternative Strategies, in: Christian Koch and Felix Neugart, *A Window of Opportunity: Europe, Gulf Security and the Aftermath of the Iraq War* (Dubai: Gulf Research center, 2005), 45.

states. But beyond this consensus, the GCC does not have the military capabilities or other hard forms of security projection that can ultimately influence the calculations of their larger and more powerful neighbors. From that context, existing commonalities are insufficient to provide broader security assurances.

To overcome this dilemma, it has to be one of the objectives of the Gulf States to continue the process begin taking ownership of the regional security process. As the former Secretary-General of the GCC Abdulla Bishara noted: "The world may laugh at us when we say that the Gulf countries alone are authorized to defend the region, but whatever our capabilities may be, we insist that this is the basic principle for achieving security and peace for our peoples."²¹ The Prime Minister of Qatar Shaikh Hamad Bin Jassim al-Thani has similarly argued that: "The security of the Gulf will remain part of the responsibility of the sons of the Gulf; it depends basically on building mutual confidence among the Gulf countries and their self-reliance."²²

There is thus an urgent need to establish an agenda based on modest yet concrete forms of cooperation formulated around common security perceptions such as the long-term economic development of the region and stability in the flow and price of oil. Given their own lack of capacity and will to make cooperation and regional institutions work, the need for outside assistance to resolve the Gulf security dilemma has prevailed. But the bottom line is that security cannot be determined solely by external factors. In addition, it has to be clearly understood by everyone that there can be no Gulf security system without the comprehensive involvement of all parties including the GCC states alongside Iraq, Iran and Yemen. If the process towards bringing such an arrangement can be initiated in the coming years, the GCC will indeed have proven invaluable to the peoples and states in the region.

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21 | Quoted in Peterson, op.cit., 203.

22 | Arabian Gulf security, responsibility of gulf sons: Qatari PM, *Kuwait News Agency*, March 10, 2008.